

The effectiveness of tutoring for improving pre-service teacher development

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Abstract

Pre-service teacher preparation in the United States is becoming progressively more challenging with respect to the demands on teachers. This study examined the impact of the tutoring approach on pre-service teachers' skills to work with English language learners (ELLs) through a qualitative research design. Content analysis was used at the thematic level on student journals written to accompany the semester-long experience of tutoring.

50 pre-service teachers participated and data was collected from 500 written journal reflections for two semesters. Overall, the pre-service teachers gained an understanding of the challenges of working with ELLs and other positive impacts through tutoring. The findings suggest that pre-service teachers have perceived value of the use of the tutoring approach in the teacher preparation program, use of strategies during field-based experiences, instructional realizations, cultural sensitivity, and professionalism. This paper concluded by discussing the need for a teacher education program to assist pre-service teachers to assimilate pedagogies and apply through the tutoring approach.

Keywords: tutoring; teacher education; reading; pre-service teacher; modification

Introduction

Pre-service teacher education in the United States is becoming progressively more challenging with respect to the demands on teachers because the number of young children whose home language is not English continues to increase. The need for educators with an understanding of English language learners (ELLs) in the school system is urgent. There are several statistics that show the growth of ELLs. For example, the diversity of the student population is growing with the expectation that the mainstream population will drop from 62.1% of school-age children to 55% by the year 2020. The largest growing ethnic group will be Hispanic American, which is predicted to move from the current 15% of the school population to 25% by the year 2050 (President's Advisory Commission, 2000). Namely, the future classroom will be more diverse and teachers have to be prepared for working with linguistically and culturally diverse students in the mainstream or bilingual/ESL classrooms. These immigrant children speak English as a second language and share a culture that is distinctly different from mainstream America. For future educators, they should have knowledge, skills and cultural sensitivity to work with ELLs. Some of these skills could be prepared through classroom lectures, classroom projects and

discussions; however, different instructional practice should be also included in a teacher preparation program in order to provide a context-based learning.

For example, tutoring is the oldest and one of the most effective forms of instruction (Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003) in the teacher preparation program. Tutoring provides an opportunity to modify instruction to meet the specific learning needs of the learner (Morrow & Woo, 2001). Several studies have found the benefits of tutoring. For example, struggling students who participate in structured tutoring programs outperform their peers academically and demonstrate more positive attitudes towards the targeted subject area than do students who participate in unstructured programs (e.g., homework support) or those who do not participate in additional programming (Baker, Gersten, & Keating, 2000; Fitzgerald, 2001; Vadasy, Sanders, Peyton, & Jenkins, 2002). The aim of this research is to examine the effectiveness of how the tutoring approach provides different benefits for pre-service teachers who will work with ELLs.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

Situated learning theory and legitimate peripheral participation (Herrington, Herrington, & Glazer, 2006; Lave & Wenger, 1991) are used to guide this study. Herrington, Herrington, and Glazer (2006) note 'situated learning places learning in the context in which it will later be applied. One of the principal effects claimed for the theory is that it facilitates transfer of learning to new situations' (p. 184). Similarly, according to Lave and Wenger (1991), legitimate peripheral participation 'draws attention to the point that learners inevitably participate in communities of practitioners and that the mastery of knowledge and skill requires newcomers to move toward full participation in the sociocultural practices of a community' (p. 29). Namely, the person has to fully participate within the learning community with other members. Through the process of participation, and reflection of one's action, the learning will occur.

In this study, pre-service teachers' learning is embedded within different activities they used in different contexts. They have to interact with individuals (students, site coordinators, and in-service teachers), as well as using the knowledge and training he or she brings from past experiences and classroom. The learning is usually unintentional and it will be helpful for their future teaching. So, the situated learning is very important because knowledge needs to be presented in authentic contexts from this perspective.

Tutoring

The potential benefits of tutoring for pre-service teachers in various content areas are well documented in a number of studies (Ryan & Robinson, 1990; Hedrick, 1999). The term *tutoring* usually refers to an interpersonal interaction whereby one person has the intention of assisting the other in the area in which the assistance is given (Topping, 2000). Tutoring can lead to an increased sense of accomplishment and self-esteem, better mastery of academic skills, increased ability to apply and integrate knowledge taught in different courses and a broader, more realistic outlook on the process of teaching and learning. Working one-on-one with a student often has the effect of substantially reducing pre-service teachers' fear of confronting a class and enables them to tailor instruction to the specific needs of the student. For students, advantages of being tutored have also been reported by a number of studies (Woodward, 1981; Hedrick, 1999). These benefits include increased feedback and encouragement through personal attention, obtaining the exact help needed, closer monitoring of progress and better mastery of skills. More studies (Liston, Borko, & Whitcomb, 2008; Moran, 2008) also suggested that preferred teacher education applicants are those who hold experientially-based knowledge of teaching, which helps as they enter programs that strive to offer practical experiences and showcase exemplary practices.

Previous studies noted many positive outcomes by using the tutoring approach, including across various contents and in the development of different teaching skills. For example, Abha (2004) examined the effects of field-based tutoring on struggling readings. Struggling readers were from two grade levels, and they were randomly divided in two groups. One group received individualized tutoring and the other group did not. After 13 sessions of one hour each per week, the students in the tutoring group had improved their grade.

Bennett (2013) investigated eight pre-service teachers' understandings about culturally responsive pedagogy as they tutored children in writing from different ethnic, socioeconomic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds in an afterschool program at a local community center. The findings showed that these participants had initial understandings of culturally responsive pedagogy. Namely, these pre-service teachers integrated the culture of students into the academic curriculum. In addition, pre-service were able to scaffold their critical thinking on tutoring ELLs.

Tutoring also helped pre-service teachers to explore themselves. Allor, Cheek, Smith, and Schorzman (2006) found, while pre-service teachers felt prepared for their role as tutor, they 'lacked a sense of self-confidence regarding their duties as 'teacher'' (p. 366). Though tutoring struggling readers often makes pre-service teachers aware of how much more they have to learn about teaching, the experience often reaffirms their decision to become teachers.

Nichols and Soe (2013) examined pre-service teachers' experiences as they volunteered for a literacy program for immigrant students. This study found the benefits of using the tutoring approach in using ELLs L1 to learn L2. For example, the pre-service teachers identified that language barriers were not as debilitating as what they had anticipated. A typical problem in teacher education programs is the idea of deficit-model thinking, that is, where too many pre-service candidates hold lower expectations for ELL learners and other minority students (Marx, 2000). Namely, participants found that students' first language is potentially helpful with learning a second language.

Research Questions

This research investigated the impact of the tutoring approach on pre-service teachers' development with regards to several aspects. These are the questions that guided this research:

- (1) While pre-service teachers tutor diverse student populations, what effective facets of field experience contribute to developing understanding about knowledge and skills?
- (2) While pre-service teachers tutor diverse student populations, what ineffective facets of field experience provide limited contributions to developing understanding about knowledge and skills?

Methodology

Qualitative research takes place in a natural setting in which the researcher collects data, analyzes them inductively with a focus on the participants, and then describes the associated process (Creswell, 2003). Further, qualitative research involves an interpretive and naturalistic approach to its subject matter – we believed that this type of approach was required to document the experiences of the pre-service teacher participants during their tutoring sessions.

Participants

The participants in this study consisted of 50 pre-service teachers. The participants were enrolled in a teacher preparation program in a university in Texas. They were enrolled in a method course for teaching non-English speaking children. This course is a requirement for EC-6 generalist, special education, and bilingual/ESL teachers. The participants in this study had served as volunteer tutors in an elementary and a middle school in Texas. In their 10-week tutoring sessions, they had to design a mini-lesson or activities in order to help ELLs' academic content knowledge and language development.

Data collection procedures

Tutoring journal

Journal writing is a technique that has been promoted by educators in many fields, including nursing, counseling and management, as a means of facilitating reflective practice and stimulating critical thinking. So, the 50 participants completed tutoring journals after each tutoring session. Five hundred written journal reflections were read and analyzed by researchers. In the journal, participants were required to describe their experiences and observation about their encounters while tutoring. They also had to discuss the effectiveness and challenges during tutoring. The researchers analyzed these journals by reading, taking notes, and finding common themes shared throughout the journals. For example, most of these participants reported the use of instructional strategies (or practices) in their journals. In all, participants engaged in 10 tutoring sessions over the course of the semester. The participants were asked to take approximately 30 minutes on the day of each tutoring session to write about their

experience and reflect upon what they did and what they learned. Having participants complete the journal on the day of the session was intended to help ensure that their memories were accurate.

Procedures

All participants were enrolled in a teaching method course that focused on teaching non-English speaking children. In this course, participants were taught the following contents: concepts essential to second language acquisition and literacy development. Participants had to demonstrate strategies for meeting individual student's needs while teaching listening, speaking, reading and writing. Essentially, all participants were trained to adopt Shelter Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) model to work with the ELLs. In the course, the pre-service teachers were exposed to the components of teaching contents, language, and literacy through course readings, classroom discussions, group teaching activities and course lectures. Once the tutoring began, participants had to meet with their ELLs every week. Each tutoring session is around fifty minutes. The tutees mainly in this study are Hispanic-speaking ELLs.

Data analysis

Analyses consisted of coding and categorizing data using the procedures that Bogdan and Biklen (1998), Creswell (2003), and Merriam (2002) describe. Specifically, each researcher independently reviewed tutoring journals and reflection essays for common patterns and themes. These data were then coded with colored font to organise the general discussion topics. The two authors then met to present our interpretations and arrive at a shared understanding the participants' experiences and verify the credibility of our patterns. Categories were compared for similarities, differences, and connections. Once the categories had been re-examined to determine how they were connected, the data were presented and clustered into common units of meaning or themes. The themes we identified represent the key recurring categories that the majority of the participants articulated.

Findings

As the journals are coded, some themes are expected to emerge. These themes are important because teachers are expected to have knowledge and skill to work with ELLs. The expected outcome will focus on the examinations on the following six themes related to the effectiveness of the tutoring approach from our analyses.

Effective Facets

Value of the tutoring approach in the teacher preparation program

Consistent with existing literature (Ryan & Robinson, 1990, Hedrick, 1999), pre-service teachers perceived that the tutoring experience with ELLs is positive. They wrote of being overwhelmed by the amount of experience learned in the field and its connection to course materials to classroom. The finding is consistent the previous studies. Some research indicated that there were reciprocal benefits of tutoring to pre-service teacher-tutors. Tutoring could help prepare teachers more effectively for ELLs. The experience deepened their knowledge about the structure of language and the knowledge assisted them in individualizing instruction (Mather, Bos, & Babur, 2001; McCutchen et al., 2002). The following excerpts noted that participants expressed the positive perception to include tutoring in their course taking.

Excerpt 1

Courses consisted of theory and concepts. Also there were many strategies introduced to work with English language learners. The course information was helpful but it made me realize more when I applied those interactive teaching ideas with my second language learner. I did not have any experience working with ELL but I guessed I still had ELLs in my classroom. This experience was valuable but it is challenging (participant, John).

Excerpt 2

In this project, teacher was very helpful when I tutored in the elementary school. I have seen my school teacher who was very good, well-organized, and helped me when I had any questions about my tutees. Also, the site-coordinator and staff in the front desk were also very nice. This experience was valuable because I felt like that I was in the actual classroom, and I could prepare myself for real

teaching in the future. I never had experience working with ELLs; however, this 10-week experience had shaped my view on bilingual education.

Views on ELLs: Redefining ELLs

Valencia (1997) identified a deficit orientation toward ELLs. Valencia (1997) states that educational deficit thinking is a form of blaming the victim that views the alleged deficiencies of poor and minority group students and their families as predominantly responsible for these students' school problems and academic failure, while frequently holding structural inequalities free of such blame. MacSwan (2000) note that 'If teachers believe that some children have a low language ability in both languages, then this belief may have a strong negative effect on their expectations for these children and the curricular content and teaching practices students receive' (p. 6). However, pre-service teacher participants' views on the population of ELLs were shaped. The following excerpts showed that pre-service teachers can articulate the ELL population from non-deficit orientations.

Excerpt 3

There was an interesting discussion in class, and it amazed me how people treated ELLs as special need learners. I did not think it is an appropriate way to define ELLs. My students were eager to learn, and they wanted to ask me questions to things they wanna know. I observed a classroom before, and the teacher was unable to teach ESL students on language development. The teacher felt that ELL had some learning issues, and they did not really help them. They were left out, and they did not understand the instruction. For my tutees, I gave them fun vocabulary games, help them to comprehend the different contents, and they are learning'. For me, I feel sad if these students are referred to the special education program.

Excerpt 4

I don't think my students who had any problem understanding my teaching. I used different manipulatives to help them to understand the language and concept. I speak Spanish, and we can communicate in the L1 language. Once he understood the instruction, we can work on the math and learn the language, too.

Contextualization of instructional strategies

Each week, pre-service teachers recalled the language and literacy activities they applied. They needed to design interactive instructional activities to help ELLs' problems on different content areas. The theme was drawn out that the tutoring experience contextualized these instructional activities, and pre-service teachers were able to apply different assessment skills to examine how much his/her tutee learned. In the beginning of the study, several participants had concerns of how to help ELLs. Once strategies were introduced in class, pre-service teachers tested these ideas in their tutoring sessions. The following language and literacy strategies had been applied to the ELLs' learning, and they had discussed how they benefited their students. This finding is important because all future educators need to be able to accommodate the needs of individual students.

Excerpt 5

The students have really had trouble with the pronouncing each letter and saying its sound. We did the 'a' and I taught them the action and we wrote it in the sky, which is a visual imagery strategy. It helped them learn more effectively and quickly.

Excerpt 6

I recognized all of the strategies that the professor used all the techniques we were taught in the second language acquisition. I have used several graphic organizers with my ELLs. My ELLs can focus on when they see the graph, table, and anchor chart. My students also enjoyed creating his own graphic organizers.

Cultural awareness and sensitivity

Pre-service teachers do not only know how to apply different instructional strategies, but they also need to get to know their students better. A growing body of literature highlights the need for pre-service and experienced teachers to know their students better, especially those students from linguistically diverse backgrounds (Jimenez & Rose, 2010). Several studies (Nieto, 2004; Sleeter & Grant, 2003; Yeung, 2006)

have recognized that a student's academic achievement is influenced by the teacher's cultural awareness. Brown (2004) found the strong correlation between teacher awareness of cultural diversity and the teaching methods used. This is, teachers exhibiting high levels of cultural awareness prove to be effective in working with diverse learners.

One of the findings from this study, for teachers who will work with ELL, is that these teachers are expected to become culturally aware. Namely, these teachers can develop 'skills in self-reflection and critical consciousness specific to racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity' (Gay & Kirkland, 2003, p. 183). Through this tutoring project, a theme was found that participants discussed their cultural awareness and sensitivity from journal reflection.

Excerpt 7

I am also from Hispanic culture, and I understood that how we learned. I also brought topics of Mexican culture with my ELL, for example, I asked him about how he celebrated his birthday, and have he had piñata, and he started to talk about his birthday memory.

Linguistic accommodations

In this study, pre-service teachers also modified their linguistic input to ELLs. ELLs are learning their second language and there are several accommodations that should be utilized in order to provide the comprehensible input. For example, pre-service teachers used slower rate of speech, exaggerated articulated on pronunciation or demonstration of consonants and vowels (excerpt 8). Similarly, accommodations were also found in morphology. Pre-service teachers used different words (antonyms, synonyms, prefix, suffix, and root words) to comprehend new vocabulary learning (excerpt 9). In order to help students to understand academic vocabulary, participants have to use some basic vocabulary to facilitate tutees' comprehension of content. Furthermore, participants were also aware of the sentence use with ELLs (excerpt 10) because the linguistic complexity could affect the comprehension.

Excerpt 8: Phonological modifications

My students can speak English, but some sounds were pronounced in Spanish. I tried to use cognate and the comparison of sounds in English and Spanish. We tried to identify some sound patterns and they were aware of the sound differences'. I think I also slowed down the rate of my speech. I tried to have exaggerated articulation on sounds and words, and my students looked at me to hear how I made those sounds.

Excerpt 9: Morphological modifications

In my tutoring session, my students brought their math worksheets. The teacher wanted me to help them to solve the math program. They were learning addition and they were some math problems. What I did is to help them to overview different ways to say addition, and how they were converted to formula.

Excerpt 10: Syntactical modifications

I used present tense and simple more present sentences when I explained the concept to my students. When we played vocabulary games, I also used short and command sentences and shorter phrases to guide them to engage in the game. In their writing samples, I also focused on how to express ideas in a simple sentence, and I tried to add more words to connect the sentence if possible.

Professionalism

As a teacher, you are knowledgeable for what you will teach. You also serve a role model to your students. According to Hoyle and John (1985), being a professional has three main points of emphasis: knowledge, autonomy and responsibility. First, the teacher should possess a complex knowledge and skills of their fields. Second, teachers are able to self-govern and have independent decision-making skills. The teachers have to conduct this skill among students, colleagues, parents and the general public. Third, a teacher's professionalism also includes ethical responsibilities. Teachers should have the ability to make responsible choices in promoting a positive learning environment. Through the 10-week tutoring project, participants expressed what professionalism they have observed from teachers. For

example, excerpt 11 showed the learning from teacher's coordination and responsibility to communicate with people.

Excerpt 11

My classroom teacher was very nice and supportive. She helped to understand my students, and she also gave clear instructions when I tutored my students there. Today, I did not see my students in the classroom we used previously. She left me a note to redirect me to find my students.

Challenges for pre-service teachers

Unpreparedness of working with ELLs

Several participants were frustrated with their lack of experiences with teacher preparation at this point in their training, and they also feel disappointed that they did not receive materials from teachers at school to work with ELLs. For example, excerpt 12 and excerpt 13 noted that they were not prepared when placed in the field; therefore, it is important for teacher preparation programs to make sure they have skills to plan their lessons. This case reflected the different issues in the teacher training process. This is important for faculty to re-examine their teaching approaches and communication with students.

This small percentage data is important to highlight because it could affect the pre-service teachers' attitude toward ELLs. Few participants expressed that they were not ready to help ELLs (Excerpt 12 and Excerpt 13) and they did not take the responsibility to assist ELLs (see excerpt 14) because they were not provided skills to help.

Excerpt 12

My students cannot put a sentence in the right word order and used the wrong forms of vocabulary. My problem is that I did not know how to explain English rules at times.

Excerpt 13

When I went to my tutoring session, I did not know what lesson I can teach my ELL. Also, I cannot come up with ideas to work with him. My students did not come to the tutoring session and they did not feel motivated.

Excerpt 14

My student cannot pronounce the /ch/ sound, but I was not able to tell him. He was very behind on his level, and he might not have support from parents.

Discussion

In this study, pre-service ESL teachers have experienced the value of the tutoring approach to work with ELLs. For example, pre-service ESL teachers have expressed the value of having tutoring in order to support their skills. Many pre-service teachers in this study did not have any experience of working closely with ELLs. The findings that emerged were congruent with Morrow and Woo's study (2001) and indicated that tutoring provides an opportunity to modify instruction to meet the specific learning needs of the learner. For example, pre-service ESL teachers modified their inputs for ELLs. Through appropriate phonological, morphological, and syntactic modifications, pre-service teachers realized that ELLs only needed modified inputs on language. Pre-service teachers also learned the professionalism from in-service teachers and site coordinators. Namely, the tutoring project influenced pre-service teachers in a positive way in that it gave them the opportunity to develop the language skills of their ELLs and, in turn, their own cultural awareness and sensitivity.

On the other hand, based on findings, some pre-service ESL teacher participants also expressed that they were not well-prepared to work with ELLs throughout the coursework. When these participants were in the field, they noted that there were not assigned activities to work with ELLs, or they were not able to work with their students because of ELLs' background and family support. This finding reflected participants' attitude toward ELLs. MacSwan's statement (2000) noted that the negative belief on ELLs could affect their teaching practices. Some participants expressed that ELLs failed to understand the tutoring because of their language and family backgrounds. Alternatively, pre-service teachers expressed that they might not go down a path to work with ELLs. The finding is important because a teacher might lower expectations of ELLs or assume ELLs have limited learning ability. Based on this

finding, it is important for teacher preparation programs to build pre-service teachers' positive attitudes and beliefs toward ELLs, and these teachers should be provided more mentorship and experiences.

Pedagogical implications

Based on the findings of this research as well as related research (Haverback, 2009; Haverback & Parault, 2008; Juel, 1996; Nierstheimer, Hopkins, Dillon, and Schmitt, 2000), the tutoring approach has provided many benefits for pre-service teachers. Therefore, teacher educators and program coordinators have to be aware of these benefits and utilize them when planning and implementing tutoring. Based on the finding of this study, this paper would like to note several suggestions to teacher educators of how to facilitate the training for working with ELLs.

First, the tutoring approach is still effective for developing pre-service teachers' skills to work with diverse learners. MacSwan and Rolstad (2003) emphasized that all students come to school with language and communicative norms governed primarily by their communities and their unique individual characteristics. In order to develop the cultural competence and sensitivity, pre-service should be provided opportunities to work with each individual in a teacher preparation program.

Second, pre-service teachers can master instructional skills through a hands-on approach. Tutoring is one of oldest approaches that can prepare in-service teachers to work with ELLs. Any teacher preparation program is expected to place students in a practicum course. Namely, many teaching techniques can be introduced in lecture; however, it will make sense when they are applied to learners.

Third, this study found that participants can learn from their mentor teachers and site coordinators at different schools. Therefore, the pre-service teachers are expected to be paired up with mentor teachers to develop their professionalism. Also, pre-service teachers are expected to develop sharp observations on what aids them in improving professionalism at work.

Conclusion

With respect to service-learning, it is clear that a powerful, experiential tutoring approach can provide pre-service teachers with the opportunity to learn about diversity and challenge their preconceived ideas about various cultural issues. Although there are a lot of different approaches to assist pre-service teachers' learning, the results of this study suggest that it is potentially valuable and feasible, thus warranting further study as a pedagogical method.

Research limitations and implications

The results reflect only about 10 weeks of interaction. It would be interesting to be able to measure each participant's developmental path in future studies, particularly comparing those who had more experience in tutoring because they were already in their student teaching with those who had no experience working with English language learners.

In addition, the reflective journals provided a kind of snapshot over a short time frame. It was a somewhat difficult to determine how and to what degree a participant developed in his/her tutoring skill. For future studies, using a different lens and data collection methods would be valuable to examine this research area further.

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